

Justice Department revives firing squad, electrocution and gas asphyxiation for federal executions

Kate Randall
28 April 2026

The Trump administration announced Friday, April 24, that the US Department of Justice will expand the methods used to execute federal death row inmates to include firing squads, electrocution and gas asphyxiation. The measure, outlined in a 48-page DOJ report titled “Restoring and Strengthening the Federal Death Penalty,” marks a further regression into barbarism by an administration that has made the expansion of state killing a central pillar of its political program.

The report, released by Acting Attorney General Todd Blanche, directs the Federal Bureau of Prisons to reinstate the single-drug pentobarbital lethal injection protocol used during Trump’s first term while expanding federal executions to include firing squads, electrocution and gas asphyxiation. The stated justification, difficulties in obtaining lethal injection drugs, is a pretext. The real purpose is to signal to the American working class and the world that the capitalist state claims the unlimited right to kill by whatever means it has at its disposal.

“Among the actions taken are readopting the lethal injection protocol utilized during the first Trump Administration, expanding the protocol to include additional manners of execution such as the firing squad, and streamlining internal processes to expedite death penalty cases,” the DOJ said in an accompanying statement.

The announcement fulfills a directive Trump issued on his first day in office, January 20, 2025. Among the dozens of executive orders signed on Inauguration Day was one titled “Restoring the Death Penalty and Protecting Public Safety,” which called for a dramatic expansion of capital punishment. The order directed the attorney general to pursue the death penalty “for all crimes of a severity demanding its use” and specifically targeted the murders of law enforcement officers and capital crimes committed by undocumented immigrants. These categories were chosen not because of any surge in such offenses, but to whip up law-and-order and anti-immigrant hysteria in the service of dictatorial rule.

The Inauguration Day order also called on the attorney general to take “all appropriate action to seek the overruling of Supreme Court precedents that limit the authority of State and Federal governments to impose capital punishment.” This amounts to a sweeping assault on decades of constitutional jurisprudence, including rulings barring the execution of the intellectually disabled and those who committed crimes as minors.

From first-term killing spree to second-term expansion

Friday’s announcement cannot be understood apart from the trajectory of the Trump administration’s relationship to capital punishment. In July 2019, then-Attorney General William Barr directed the Bureau of Prisons to reinstate federal executions for the first time in 16 years. What followed was an assembly line of state killing. Between July 2020 and January 2021, the Trump administration executed 13 federal prisoners, more than the federal government had put to death over the previous three decades and more than all 50 states combined in 2020.

The final days of Trump’s first term saw a particular frenzy of state killing. In the week before Inauguration Day on January 20, 2021, the administration executed three prisoners in rapid succession: Lisa Montgomery on January 13, Corey Johnson on January 14, and Dustin Higgs in the early hours of January 16. Montgomery, whose history of gang rape, incest and child sex trafficking had left her severely mentally ill, was the first woman executed by the federal government in almost seven decades. Both Johnson and Higgs were likely intellectually disabled, yet the Supreme Court, with its 6-3 ultra-conservative majority, allowed their executions to proceed without giving either man a proper judicial hearing on his eligibility for the death penalty.

In November 2020, the Trump administration had also published a regulation permitting the federal government to execute prisoners using any method “prescribed by the law of the state in which the sentence was imposed,” laying the legal groundwork for precisely what the DOJ announced Friday.

Biden, upon taking office, imposed a moratorium on federal executions. In December 2024, he commuted the death sentences of 37 of the 40 prisoners on federal death row to life in prison without parole, sparing all but Dylann Roof, Dzhokhar Tsarnaev and Robert Bowers. Trump responded with volcanic fury on his Truth Social platform, falsely denouncing Biden’s commutations as a “pardon” of “the 37 most violent criminals” and telling the prisoners whose lives had been spared to “GO TO HELL!”

On his first day back in office, Trump signed the Inauguration Day death penalty order directing the attorney general to investigate whether the 37 commuted prisoners could be charged with state capital crimes. The measure was a legally dubious effort to exploit the “separate sovereigns” doctrine to nullify Biden’s acts of clemency. The administration has since transferred a number of these men to ADX Florence in Colorado, the federal supermax facility known as the “Alcatraz of the Rockies,” imposing what amounts to extrajudicial punishment intended to ensure that their conditions of confinement

match, in Trump’s words, “the monstrosity of their crimes.”

States blaze the trail

The federal expansion of execution methods follows a pattern already established at the state level under the political cover Trump’s administration has provided.

South Carolina carried out three firing squad executions in 2025, the first uses of that method anywhere in the United States since Utah executed Ronnie Lee Gardner in 2010. Brad Sigmon, 67, was killed on March 7, followed by Mikal Mahdi on April 11 and Stephen Bryant on November 14. All three were executed at the Broad River Correctional Institution in Columbia. Sigmon, convicted of the 2001 bludgeoning deaths of his ex-girlfriend’s parents, chose the firing squad over the electric chair and lethal injection out of fear that those methods would prove more painful, a choice that tells the full story of the “menu of horrors” the state presented to him. South Carolina keeps the details of its lethal injection protocol secret, and Sigmon had twice before faced execution dates called off because the state could not obtain the necessary drugs.

His attorney, Gerald “Bo” King, described the execution as “horrifying and violent.” He stated: “Everything about this barbaric, state-sanctioned atrocity—from the choice to the method itself—is abjectly cruel. We should not just be horrified—we should be furious.”

The brutality of what followed Sigmon’s death gave the lie to official assurances that the firing squad is quick and professional. Five weeks later, on April 11, 2025, Mikal Mahdi became the second person executed by firing squad in South Carolina. An autopsy revealed he had been struck by only two of the prescribed three bullets. A pathologist concluded that it likely took between 30 and 60 seconds for Mahdi to lose consciousness, during which time he would have suffered excruciating pain as his lungs struggled to expand against a broken sternum and he experienced what doctors described as “air hunger.”

In Idaho, meanwhile, Governor Brad Little signed House Bill 37 in March 2025, making Idaho the first state in the nation to designate the firing squad as its primary method of execution. The law takes effect July 1, 2026. The Idaho Department of Correction has since been constructing a remote-controlled firing squad chamber, a retrofit of the F Block execution unit at the Idaho State Maximum Security Institution, designed to “minimize correctional staff involvement,” allowing the state to kill a human being at the push of a button. Internal emails between contractors discuss floor drains to “mop/squeegee liquids” and soundproofing to prevent other incarcerated people from hearing the shots. The Idaho Department of Correction paused executions in May 2025 to complete the renovations in time for a July 1, 2026 implementation.

Florida Governor Ron DeSantis, following Trump’s lead, oversaw 19 executions in 2025 alone, the most in a single year in the state’s modern history and more than double the previous record of eight, set in 1984 and matched in 2014.

The political meaning of state killing

The DOJ’s Friday announcement is not simply a technical adjustment to execution protocols. It is a political act, rooted in the Trump administration’s drive toward authoritarian rule. The promotion of the death penalty, with its deliberate cultivation of fear, anti-immigrant hysteria and celebration of state violence, is integral to the effort to intimidate the working class with the lethal power of the capitalist state.

The DOJ’s 48-page report claims that the expansion of execution methods will deter crime, deliver justice to victims and provide “long-overdue closure to surviving loved ones.” These are lies. A study by the Death Penalty Policy Project found that since the US Supreme Court reinstated the death penalty in 1976, “the public and police are actually safer in states that don’t have or have recently abolished the death penalty” and that “the states that are now most actively carrying out executions are among the least safe for the public and most dangerous for police.” Popular support for the death penalty remains at a five-decade low, with Gallup polling showing especially sharp opposition among younger people. In 2025, only 41 percent of adults aged 18 to 34 and 46 percent of those aged 35 to 54 supported capital punishment.

The history of the firing squad itself gives the lie to any pretense that the state is searching for a more humane method of execution. In fact, the Trump administration has not claimed to be seeking a more merciful form of state killing. Quite the opposite.

As the WSWS has documented, the firing squad has historically been deployed most widely in war—for the execution of deserters, the massacre of civilians, and the liquidation of political opponents of repressive and colonial regimes. Irish socialist James Connolly, so badly wounded during the 1916 Easter Rising against British colonialism that he could not stand, was tied to a chair before he was shot. Polish civilians were massacred by firing squad at Bochnia in December 1939 in one of the first mass reprisal killings of the Nazi occupation. Greek villagers in Kondomari were rounded up and shot in June 1941. These are the historical antecedents of the method now being normalized in the execution chambers of South Carolina, Idaho and the federal prison system.

There is a direct line between these acts of domestic state violence and the violence US imperialism inflicts around the world. The same administration that is rushing to expand and mechanize the execution of death row prisoners, many of them the products of poverty, abuse and a social order that abandoned them long before they came before a judge, is threatening to destroy Iran’s civilization and prosecuting military operations across the globe.

As Karl Marx wrote in the *New-York Daily Tribune* in February 1853: “It would be very difficult, if not altogether impossible, to establish any principle upon which the justice or expediency of capital punishment could be founded, in a society glorifying in its civilization.” His words have lost none of their force. The expansion of the death penalty, the revived firing squad and the remote-controlled execution chamber in Idaho are expressions of a system that holds human life in total contempt—and of a ruling class that knows it is sitting atop a social order heading toward an explosion.



To contact the WSWS and the
Socialist Equality Party visit:

wsws.org/contact